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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the history of the St. Lambert bilingual education experiment in Montreal, Canada, and bilingual education in general. The experimental project was begun because parents did not feel that the traditional language classes were successful in teaching their children French. The belief that native language skills would suffer, and simple resistance to French, delayed the implementation of an immersion program at the kidergarten level. It had marked success: academic achievement, mother tongue competency, and other areas of intellectual development were not hampered. By grade 7, children who had begun in the program not only performed better than peers who had been through English-only programs in vocabulary tests, reading, spelling, and language skills, but also performed at or above the level of their French-Canadian peers in most tests of French language skills. Attitudes towards French-Canadians also improved, as well as general thinking skills, as a result of the bilingual program. Reasons for the program are outlined, including criteria for program-participant selection. The St. Lambert project is compared to other bilingual projects, and the present Canadian language situation is discussed. (CLK)

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An Experiment with Bilingualism

by *Lynn Holden*
Fall issue of McGill News

> Learning a second language can be easy and even fun if instruction is given in the right way at the right time of a person's life.

Eleven years ago in the quiet Montreal suburb of St. Lambert, a group of English parents met to discuss the progress their children were making at school in learning French. They were unaware of studies that had been made in the field of bilingualism. They had no idea that it was theories influenced by Behaviourist B.F. Skinner that provided a convenient rationale for the fifties mode of second language instruction which emphasized form, grammar, and rehearsal drills. Nor did they know that between the ages of one and a half and two and a half, babies use language for about 3,000 hours whereas over a span of eleven years school children in traditional programs likely speak a second language for only ten hours. What the South Shore parents did know, however, was that their children were becoming no more bilingual than they themselves had. And they were angry about it.

Reasoning that the St. Lambert English Protestant school system should be able to teach students to speak French and communicate with the other half of their community, the parents presented a proposal to the local school board for an "immersion" kindergarten to be run entirely in French. The request was flatly turned down. Some board members feared the children's English language skills would suffer. Others, who looked on at Quebec's "quiet revolution" with disapproval, objected on more emotional grounds: it would be giving in to the French. The determined

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parents sought advice from numerous experts, Wallie Lambert among them. The McGill psychologist, who had studied bilingualism, lent wholehearted academic endorsement. The proposal received favorable response elsewhere, too. A *Montreal Star* editorial referred to it as "revolutionary", and added: "If Quebec is to be bilingual, as so many now agree that it should be, some revolutionary steps will have to be taken in the schools." Turning a deaf ear, the board refused to budge.

That obdurate attitude only fed the parents' determination. They sponsored after-school language classes, renting space from churches and the Catholic School Commission. Recognizing that was still not enough, a number of them sought to upset the composition of the school board when elections were scheduled. And throughout 1964 they boned up on research in bilingual education to promote their cause more articulately and more cogently. They held meetings to rally public attention. One parent wrote a series of articles in the local press on the advantages of early bilingualism. Gradually, they began to win more converts to their way of thinking. The school board's French supervisor, who had visited the innovative French School in Toronto, declared that the immersion method was effective and saw no objection to trying it out at the kindergarten level.

Nearly two years after the initial proposal, the board finally relented and agreed to set up the experimental program. "It took a certain amount of courage for parents to put their children in the program", one mother remembers, "especially when the school authorities took the approach — 'you asked for it; if it doesn't work, it's not our fault'." But when registration began one afternoon in the spring of 1965, there was a crush. Within minutes the quota of twenty-six children had been filled, and some parents who had fought long and hard for the immersion scheme had to be turned away. The inauguration of that kindergarten class was the first and most important victory for the parent group.

The children were watched closely for signs of emotional strain or deterioration in their English. "By Christmas time", a parent recalls, "most of us were relieved to find the children absorbing with apparent ease a language we ourselves had failed to master. The young scholars even appeared happy."

Most of those kindergarteners are now entering grade nine and the tenth year of the language program which had gradually introduced English language instruction in equal proportion to French during the high school years. Lambert had collaborated with McGill Psychology Professor Richard Tucker and other colleagues in careful annual follow-up studies, with partial results pub-

lished in 1972 in a book entitled, *Bilingual Education: The St. Lambert Experiment*. Their view — academically, the program has been a resounding success. No if's, but's, or maybe's.

The St. Lambert experiment confirmed unequivocally that learning a second language need not be the stumbling block that a majority of North Americans perceive it to be. (Of course, elsewhere it has never been a problem — more than half the world's population speaks more than one language.) Nor did the program produce any of the bad side-effects pessimists had predicted. "We were watching for foul balls all through the game," stresses Lambert, "and prepared for negative feedback. We just didn't get any." Their immersion did not hamper the children's general academic achievement, their facility in their mother tongue, or any other area of their intellectual development. McGill Child Psychologist Sam Rabinovitch has kept close tabs on the few who had entered the program with specific learning disabilities. Even they have done just as well as their counterparts in traditional English schools and have the bonus of being able to speak French. Emotionally, too, complaints have been rare. In grade four, the students themselves were asked if they wanted to switch to the standard curriculum. They didn't. If anything, they wanted more French. At the same time, ironically, children in the regular stream who sat through only a single period of French a day said that they wanted less. The more of the second language the students had, it seemed, the more they liked it, and the easier and more fun it became.

By grade seven, the children in the immersion program were still performing better than most in regular schools on tests of English vocabulary, reading, spelling, and language study skills. *Furthermore, they were at or above the level of a majority of French-Canadian children in most tests of French language skills.* In short, one psychologist concludes in her research on the experiment, "the children's outstanding capacity to communicate efficiently and functionally in both languages would seem to indicate that a bilingual education is the natural way of education."

There were unexpected fringe benefits, too. While retaining a strong sense of their own cultural identity, the St. Lambert children developed more understanding and favorable attitudes towards French Canadians than their peers in regular programs — a first step on the road to real communication between the two solitudes. And there was still another advantage. On one test measuring flexible or divergent thinking skills, the bilingual children have done consistently better over the past nine years than their monolingual peers.

Of course, it was not the first time that young children

have been immersed in a second language. Immigrant and ethnic minority youngsters have always undergone the same thing informally on entering school. In fact, it was studies on those groups in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s that initially generated gloominess regarding bilingual education. Learning a second language had proved an uphill and often unsuccessful struggle for the Spanish American and other such children. Why was it, then, that the English St. Lambert students so easily adapted to French?

In attempting to answer that question, Lambert, together with other members of the McGill team who had become involved in studying the experiment, came up with a theory of "additive" and "subtractive" bilingualism. Put simply, early immersion in a second language can be an enriching experience for some children, a harmful one for others. When deciding whether to immerse a youngster, Lambert and Tucker suggest parents and educators look closely at two factors: which language is ignored by the dominant society; and how secure feels the child with his own mother tongue and cultural identity. It is best, the psychologists feel, to introduce the child to schooling in the language that is neglected by the community at large.

For an English Canadian, immersion in French appears singularly beneficial. Stresses Lambert: "It's very important that there be a favourable attitude on the Anglo side towards learning French, towards becoming a double-barrelled Canadian, since it is the French language which is threatened in the North American setting." On the other hand, for a French Canadian - whose language is the single most important element in his cultural identity — it is best to get a good foundation in French first before tackling English. "Once there's an assurance that the child's got it in French, school language as well as parlance, then he can go from French into the other language", says Lambert. "You've got to make sure that a minority group member, whether French Canadian or Spanish American, feels comfortable in his ethnic identity. You can't give him a promissory note — go through elementary school and then we'll give you French or Spanish training in high school. That's a promissory note that is a dirty one."

The 1971 report of the federal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism expressed much the same point of view: The fate of a language depends on the persistence of its use by the native born; it must receive support at the lower age levels if it is to survive. That philosophy has recently prompted the development of native language instruction in government schools for some Canadian Indians and Eskimos. Only when the children are in grade three will they gradually be introduced to a second language — either French or English.

Lambert welcomes the new direction in bilingual education. And he hopes that other communities as the Greek one in Montreal will follow that lead, first teaching their children Greek and gradually honing in on the target second language. Some think there is an element of risk in that approach. McGill Social Psychologist Don Taylor points out: "Remember that they still live in a society that demands that they speak English, or in this province French, and furthermore, to speak a standard form of that language." Unless societal attitudes towards different cultures, languages, and accents change considerably, he believes it is still the individual who must conform to compete in the community at large. Lambert is aware that immigrant parents want to make certain that doors closed to their own generation, partly because of the language barrier, will be open to their children. He maintains, however, that the children will best succeed in mastering a second language when their native language and culture comes first. "At first parents don't think it's worth the kid's time", he says. "There will be a debate in the Greek community. The parents will say, 'The hell with that. It's going to be a mark against him.' But it's time they began to realize that it's one of the strongest marks for him."

Despite the success of the growing number of experiments, however, one McGill psychologist who studied at first hand Ireland's efforts to make Irish the national language remains skeptical of bilingual education in the schools. "You don't really learn a language at school," claims John Macnamara. "You learn language from your mother and father, and from other children. In school you seem to resist." He concedes that the St. Lambert children do speak fluent French, but questions the extent to which they will continue to use it outside school. In Ireland, he points out, the government "used every method available to modern education. Although forty-two per cent of the first six years were given to the Irish language, dropping things like nature study and physical education to make way for Irish, they could not reverse the trend to English. If you ever want a demonstration that schools are not important, that's one."

One major reason for the failure in Ireland: parents and leaders abnegated responsibility. "You don't change a society through children," Macnamara emphasizes. Unless adults are willing to make sacrifices for a language, children won't either. The psychologist attributes the Israeli success in reviving Hebrew as a national language after 2,000 years of relative disuse to the very fact that older people made enormous efforts. "The parents went out and learned Hebrew. They tried and tried and made fools of themselves by speaking bad Hebrew. But they used it." Macnamara, however, acknowledges that no real parallels between the Irish, Israeli, and the Canadian situations can be drawn. "We're not

dealing with chemical reactions, we're dealing with people. And the main ingredient in the success of any program is the idealism and determination of the people in it."

More than ever before, Canadians today appear to have that idealism and determination. In light of the federal government's encouragement of multiethnicity — "unity through diversity" — more and more ethnic groups are pushing to receive instruction in their own languages in the schools. It is not only French Canadians who are seeking political action to protect their language and culture. In a recent letter to *Saturday Night* magazine, a spokesman for the Ukrainian Canadian University students' Union wrote: "Inherent in the understanding of multiculturalism must be the recognition that in order to understand the various cultures, one must have an understanding of that culture's language. We will continue to battle...until we are given full and truly equal rights."

The fight for second language instruction is gaining momentum, with a mushrooming number of programs across the country. In Montreal alone last year, three-quarters of the children enrolled in Montreal Protestant School Board institutions were in partial or full immersion French programs. Trilingual programs in French, Italian, and English are being offered at a few schools, while double immersion in French and Hebrew (with English learned in the family environment) is being tried at several Jewish parochial schools. In addition, more second languages courses are being scheduled for high school curricula.

Universities, too, may gradually assume a larger role in keeping alive the languages and cultures of minority groups, as the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission recommended. Professor Anna Farmakides, a creative and enthusiastic modern Greek teacher on campus, believes that is essential. "Quite simply, all immigrants should be able to look to McGill for the perpetuation of their culture", she declares. Initially a French instructor, Farmakides herself initiated a program in modern Greek when she discovered students in her French courses who had tried to conceal their Greek background. She introduced courses in which Greek Canadians would learn to be proud of being Greek as well as Canadian.

Psychologist Taylor lauds "the marvellous social experiment" under way in Canada. But he warns that changing political and economic events may jeopardize it. "When things are going well," he says, "when there is economic, political, and military security, then people are willing to experiment. They feel secure to learn another language. But when things get tough, people withdraw to their own group. And we'll start focusing on language differences

as the cause of all our problems."

Times have changed since the inauguration of the St. Lambert experiment. Quebec's controversial language Bill 22, which makes French the official language in the province, may have created just the climate of insecurity to dampen experimental fervour, at least on the part of English Canadians. "For the first time," Taylor observes, "English Canadians are experiencing what it's like to be a minority. They have a feeling of wanting to belong to this thing called Quebec. But somehow, they feel whatever they do, they don't belong." Lambert is worried, too. During a period in which the federal government is trying to recognize the right of all groups to an education in their own language, he perceives a "pathos and desperation" in Quebec's recognition of only one language. He fears that Bill 22 has "all the markings of a squelcher" for an experiment in bilingualism that was snowballing on a voluntary basis. He asks, "So the chances for separateness and the freedom to be oneself — what is happening to it? I hope that society will evolve so that people can have every right, and publicly supported rights, to be themselves, and to be close to the other groups they want to be close to through proper training in the other language."

If Canada is to retain the mosaic on which it prides itself, it must evolve to that point. To keep up cross-cultural communication, Canadians must persist in learning a second or even a third language. Wonderful opportunities now exist. And, as the numerous experiments have shown, it lies within the realm of everyone to become bilingual. Says Lambert: "You can't say bilingual education is complicated, because we can prove it's easy!" ●